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ABSTRACT

Observations of the developing writing patterns of one child over a period of five years brought insight to the question of how children learn to write. The patterns, identifiable in other areas of child development, were the processes of differentiation and decentration, the sometimes nonparallel growth of form and function, and an increasing realism. Initial semisyllabic spelling systems moved to more finely tuned systems that separate consonant and vowel sounds. Other examples of developmental growth included: (1) increasingly differentiated structures and styles, (2) content drawn from a widening world in which a more conventional sense of reality prevails, and (3) a greater awareness of audience. This development was demonstrated in the case study subject through the changes in two of his writing forms, the newspaper and the short story. (AEA)

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Patterns of Development in Writing

Case study of a child from five to ten years old

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What can we learn from studying the writings of one child? Beyond learning about that particular child, we are surely observing some things that hold true for other children, though which things and for how many others we can only know from broader studies. But from observing one child we have some leads--some questions to ask and patterns to look for in studying other children.

While we cannot generalize from one case to many, conversely, we cannot presume to know an individual only in terms of generalizations drawn from groups. In schools we usually teach to groups, though children--like the rest of us--learn as individuals in the context of groups.

Paul, the child I observed, wrote his first messages using letters when he was four years old. One was a semi-linear arrangement of large, green letter forms intended to cheer me up. As a five-year-old, he wrote PAULS LATR TOO MAM DER MAM (Paul's letter to Mom. Dear Mom.). At nine years old, he wrote this letter:

Jan. 7, 1977

Dear Sirs,

Your metric information sounds like a very handy thing to have. So please send me one.

My address is: (address label affixed)

Your customer,

Paul Bissex

How does a child move from a global, pre-spelling concept of letter forms expressing a message, to a concept of writing that includes representing words through an alphabetic spelling system, using and selecting appropriate compositional forms, being aware of an audience, and changing styles in accordance with that audience? In other words, how does a child learn to write?

Linguists tell us that children learn to speak not as mere imitators of adult language, but as experimenters--as little scientists constructing and revising their own rules until they can produce sentences like those of the mature speakers they hear. Through research on invented spelling we have just begun to observe how some children in fact learn to spell as distinct from our preconceptions and teaching methods. Charles Read, the first researcher of children's invented spelling, has argued that spelling ability grows from understanding a system and cannot be accounted for as the product of memorized lists of unpredictably spelled words. Spelling may have become a matter of habit for mature writers--but learning to spell, like learning to speak, involves constructing and revising rules.

I am going to describe some patterns I saw in the development of one child's writings over five years. These patterns, which have also been observed in other areas of child development, are the processes of differentiation and decentration, the sometimes non-parallel growth of form and function, and an increasing realism.

"Differentiation," a term developmental psychologists borrowed from biology, is the subdividing of what was earlier a diffuse whole into parts with more specialized forms and functions. How does differentiation characterize the growth of a child's written

language? Paul, as we saw, started writing using letter-like forms in a non-linear arrangement to convey a message; the letters did not represent words or sounds but rather an intent to communicate a feeling. His next step in writing reflected a concept of letters as representing speech sounds. This was evident in his "letter to Mom," but even earlier in the first message he spelled by himself: RUDF. When five-year-old Paul wrote this, I was reading outside on the deck and he was in the house. After several unsuccessful attempts to talk with me, he took rubber letter stamps from his set, printed this message, and delivered it to me with feeling. Do you know what it says? "Are you deaf?!" Of course, I put down my book. He had broken through print with print.

Since he had not been taught the letter sounds, Paul constructed sound-letter relationships on the basis of letter names--a strategy that Read has described. Because letter names are syllables, Paul's first spelling system was semi-syllabic, as in the above note. Later he was able to make finer separations between consonant and vowel sounds. In spelling "telephone," for example, he put a vowel before the l rather than just using the letter "L" to stand for its name. He asked many questions about how to represent sounds that were not contained in letter names, such as "What letter makes the sh sound?"

A month after printing RUDF, Paul typed EFUKANOPNKAZIWILGEVU-AKANOPENR. You are probably having as much difficulty as I did deciphering it. Paul read it for me: "If you can open cans, I will give you a can opener." I mentioned to him that most people, when they write, leave a space between words. A few minutes later he

typed EFU WAUTH KLOZ IWEL GEVUA WAUTHENMATHEN ("If you wash clothes, I will give you a washing machine"). Soon he was separating all his words. When he wrote by hand, which he did more often than typing, he segmented with dots rather than spaces. For a time he carried this strategy so far that he segmented some affixes as well: PAUL.IS.GOWING.TO.RUN.A.RAWND.AND.JUMP.AND.EXRSIZ. He titled this RE.PORT.KARD.ON.SPORTS. Dots were Paul's reinvention of a device used in ancient manuscripts; in fact in the very earliest manuscripts words were not separated at all, so Paul was recapitulating a bit of the history of writing.

Paul wrote his "report card on sports" seven months after he had started inventing spellings. After he wrote it, he asked repeatedly if it was all correct. He had not suddenly become concerned with correctness, but his sense of the unit of correctness had changed from letters to words. His questions about spelling had already shifted from asking how to represent sounds to asking how to spell words. A question like "What letter makes the 'ah' sound?" implies just as correct an answer as the question "How do you spell 'again'?"

In the evolution of his spelling of the word "directions," we can see Paul's ability to make finer and more complex distinctions:

5:7 DRAKTHENS

5:8 DRAKSHINS

7:5 DIRECKSHONS

7:5 DIREKSHONS

8:1 DIRECTIONS ? (unsure whether it was -TION or -TOIN)

8:4 DIRECTIONS

Clearly he regarded his spellings as perfectible rather than as fixed word patterns to be repeated from memory.

Paul wrote a great deal before first grade--and even before he was able to read much. His use of invented spellings enabled him to write freely from the start in what may seem a surprising variety of compositional forms: signs, labels and captions; stories; little books; directions; lists or catalogues; newspapers; notes, letters and greeting cards; statements; and school-type exercises. He wrote spontaneously in more different forms than he used in school assignments. Many forms he continued to write in over the five years of this study, though sometimes with dramatic changes in their functions (see Table 1).

At the very beginning of writing, he wrote a series of what I would call labels, each on a separate piece of paper, such as PAULS TALAFONBOOTH (Paul's telephone booth), PAULS GAMP ROP (Paul's jump rope) and PAULS DP (Paul's dump). They were labels in form but not in function since they had no concrete referents. Slightly later he typed PAULZCIDERMUSHEN (Paul's cider machine) on a sheet of paper with a drawing of a machine on it, which was more functionally a label. Later, he attached signs to objects around the house; a kitchen cupboard was labeled PAULZ RABR SAF RABRZ KANT GT EN (Paul's robber safe. Robbers can't get in). He also did a lot of writing and drawing on wooden blocks, making permanent and real their transformations from mere pieces of wood into "factories," "radios" and so forth. Taking on a more conventional and realistic function, a sign Paul posted on his bedroom door read DO.NAT KM.IN.ANE.MOR.JST. LETL.KES (Do not come in any more. Just little kids). Later signs and labels he wrote were increasingly conventional in function, as signs for sales and performances he was putting on.

Another example of form preceding function was Paul's contentless "letter to Mom" as contrasted with the letter he wrote four years later requesting metric information (both of which you saw earlier). This same pattern of form preceding function has been observed in language development--for example, by Piaget in young children's use of "because" before they have a sense of causality.

One of Paul's enduring compositional forms was the newspaper. In tracing the development of his newspapers we can see patterns of increasing differentiation and realism. At 5:7 Paul produced his version of our local paper, the Times Argus: TIMS. R.GIS. THAR. WL. B. SHAWRS. IN. THE. AFTR.NUN. (There will be showers in the afternoon). His newspaper a year later contained funnies, an extended weather forecast, illustrated advertisements and a sports item--all fanciful. This paper was written on a large sheet of cardboard with a series of irregularly drawn boxes, each containing one feature. In Paul's "Daily Blab" (8:4) funnies again came first, followed by a notice, a puzzle, a request column and an advice column. Verbal humor had been added to pictorial physical violence in his funnies, and for the first time there was news about an actual event. "The Daily Round Up" (9:1) was more realistic in format with narrow typed columns, headlines, and a photograph. The notices were again of real events. Paul's humor was more sophisticated and verbal, with a "Pistol Paul" parody recalling Mad magazine, which he has adored since he was seven years old. Paul moved from a very partial and global sense of a newspaper to producing much more differentiated, precisely imitated and realistic versions.

Another enduring form of writing was the story. One of Paul's

very early compositions was a little story with the conventional "once upon a time" beginning, in which a single character performs a single action--the barest bones of a story. It was sprawled in large blue letters over five sheets of paper: "Once upon a time there was a bear and that bear went away and he never came back again" (5:1). A year later, as a first grader, Paul wrote daily "stories" beneath a drawing he had made. At about six and a half, he wrote in school this story involving two characters, a conflict, and a sequence of actions. "This is the police chasing me and I am going to go up a ramp and I am going to land in a hole and the hole is my hideout."

The next year, his characters had motivations and feelings that accounted for the more extended and complicated chain of events. A hero with a goal meets an obstacle which he overcomes. "Once upon a time there was a little rabbit who had no home. So he looked for one. In the distance he could see a light. He went toward it. It was a house. At last he had a home! He went in. This is what it looked like (drawing of the interior). Then a man came out of a door and took the rabbit out. The rabbit came back to the house. This time the man felt sorry for the rabbit and let the rabbit in and the rabbit and the man lived happily ever after. The end." The rabbit story is a transition from simple, childish narratives to an elaborated piece of youthful literature, "A Magic Carpet or Two," (8:4). The story begins like this:

> Once I was playing with two of my best friends Kenny and Matthew. We were in the attic of Kenny's garage sorting out old junk and stuff. Then Kenny's sister Robin came in the garage and was going to come up. There was a hole directly above,

about 1 foot from the first step. There was a lot of cloth in the attic of the garage--some pieces big, some small. We used the big pieces to keep people from coming up. We dropped the cloth down the hole. It was going to hit Robin but then it started flying. I grabbed it. I got on it and sat Indian style. Then it flew down the steps and out of the garage. And then it started going what seemed like 100 miles per hour, and before I knew it I was in some strange desert. Then I saw a man and when he saw me he said, "Put him down, put him down, magic carpet, to the ground." The carpet stopped flying and landed. I said, "Who are you?" "I am the owner of the carpet you are sitting on," was what he said. I didn't know what to say. Then he said, "I could teach you the magic words. Would you like that?" "Yes I would." He taught me all the magic words for up and down. Then I got on, waved goodbye, and said, "Carpet rise, carpet rise, fly way up into the skies," and the carpet started flying. I suppose you want to know how you steer a magic carpet. Well, if you want to go right, you lift up the front left corner, and the opposite for going left. It was almost supper time so I flew home, hid my magic carpet in the storage, and then I went in to eat my supper.

In chapter 2 the carpet delights and amazes Paul's third grade classmates at school, but in chapter 3 it starts tearing around the classroom and wrecks the school building.

"A Magic Carpet or Two" presents a cast of (relatively) thousands, moving across four settings. Throughout the story the everyday world of school routines, friends and home, with its order and predictability, is contrasted with the magical world of the carpet,

which breaks down boundaries and structures and expectations. While there is a dream-like intermingling of the strange with the familiar, Paul's sense of reality is mature; he can distinguish the supernatural from the ordinary. Instead of the straight narration of earlier stories, he uses a combination of different techniques: dramatization, dialogue and narrative. As a story teller Paul is now aware of his audience--sometimes explicitly, as when he remarks, "I suppose you want to know how you steer a magic carpet."

Other forms besides newspapers and stories, which might be traced through several years of Paul's writings, show similar patterns of development: increasingly differentiated structures and styles, content drawn from an ever wider world in which a more conventional sense of reality prevails, and greater awareness of an audience. Development appears to proceed from global to increasingly differentiated functions and awarenesses.

Paul's writing development was expressed not only in progressions within forms, but in the disappearance of some early compositional forms and the later addition of other kinds of forms (see Table 1). I have labeled as "statements" certain writings that seemed unclassifiable by adult categories--writings such as "Birds can fly and birds can go places" or "If you can open cans, I will give you a can opener." Conventional categories may not apply to the writings of young children, who do not see the world as adults see it, and who do not make adult distinctions. Understanding the purposes of a child's writing means understanding his changing view of himself and the world.

As a five-year-old Paul was still absorbed in naming--in knowing the world by naming its parts; in his signs and labels and captions, he extended naming through writing. In the next year or

two, as his reasoning developed, and his need to know and control the world around him became expressed through categorizing, this form of knowing, too, was reflected in his charts, schedules and other organizational writings. His interest in the larger world around him was expressed through informational writings (as well as readings, such as The Curious Book and The Guinness Book of World Records).

Decentration is Piaget's term for this movement outward from the young child's egocentric view of the world. Decentration involves being able to take another person's point of view, which increases about age seven. In Paul's early writings there was no clear distinction between writer and audience in the sense of someone who does not automatically share all the writer's unexpressed knowledge. When he wrote "A Magic Carpet or Two" as an eight-year-old, he could stand outside his writing--outside his understanding of what he had written--and give explanations to a reader.

Decentration goes hand in hand with differentiation. Not only did Paul come to differentiate writer and audience, but various kinds of audiences: peers, teachers, parents, unknown clerks (in business letters) and self (in diaries). He was polite and business-like in business letters, could sound quite bookish in his school writings, and teasing and humorous with parents and friends. The widening world of his audience and of his interests--the expansiveness of decentration--was reflected in his writings.

When he was five-and-a-half years old, Paul wrote and posted this sign over his workbench: DO NAT DSTRB GNYS AT WRK. The "genius

at work" is our human capacity for language. "Do not disturb" is a caution to observe how it works, for the logic by which we teach is not always the logic by which children learn.

Table 1

Forms of Writing

	Ages				
Persistent forms	5	6	7	8	9
signs, labels, captions	X	X	X	X	X
stories	X	X	X	X	X
little books	X	X	X	X	X
directions	X	X	X	X	X
lists or catalogues	X	X	X	X	X
newspapers	X	X	X	X	X
notes, letters, greeting cards	X	X	X	X	X
Discontinued forms					
"statements"	X				
school-type exercises	X	X	X		
riddles		X	continued orally		
Later forms					
rhymes		X	X	X	X
charts, organizers and planners			X	X	X
diary				X	X
quizzes (information in Q & A form)				X	X
informational & observational notebook				X	X
codes					X